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SUBJECT: CHARGE INFORMS DFM MU'ALLIM THAT AMBASSADOR WILL  
NOT RETURN

REF: STATE 14488

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: Using reftel points, Charge informed SARG DFM Walid Mu'allim February 1 that Ambassador Scobey would not be returning to post. Mu'allim called the decision a mistake. The DFM also took issue with the points raised on Iraq, Palestinian rejectionist groups, Lebanon, and the need to respect human rights in Syria, and also rejected the Charge's criticism of the Ahmadinejad visit to Damascus. On Iraq, Mu'allim urged the U.S., for its own interests, to allow Iraqi officials to engage with Syria, noting that the SARG is willing to establish full diplomatic relations and cooperate in all fields. Mu'allim described as misguided the U.S. Treasury designation of SMI head Asif Shawkat, saying Shawkat is "a real partner" for the USG. End Summary.

¶2. (C) AMBASSADOR NOT COMING BACK: In a February 1 meeting at the MFA, Charge informed DFM Mu'allim that Ambassador Scobey will not be returning to post and that she will not be replaced at this time. Charge made clear that the reason for this action was SARG failure to take action on key issues of concern, including foreign-fighter networks in Syria, SARG interference in the internal affairs of Lebanon, Palestinian rejectionist groups resident in Damascus, and continued repression of its own citizens. The Charge also noted that the recent visit to Syria of Iranian President Ahmadinejad had served to reinforce in Washington the impression that Damascus continued to be a destabilizing force in the region.

¶3. (C) DFM CALLS IT A MISTAKE: While acknowledging that the decision on the Ambassador was for the U.S. to make, Mu'allim termed it "a real mistake," making a pitch for robust diplomatic relations as an instrument for effective foreign relations and for facilitating dialogue. The DFM said he found the decision to be symptomatic of U.S. policy towards Syria, which relied on "demands" rather than on efforts to find common ground. In Mu'allim's view, the U.S. also needed an ambassador in Damascus because the U.S. "is losing momentum in the region."

¶4. (C) IRAN: Responding to the broader concerns that Charge raised, Mu'allim ticked off the SARG view, taking as his starting point the concern raised by the Iranian president's visit. In his view, the joint communique the two sides issued during that visit contained "cautious" and "responsible" language on a range of issues, including Iran's nuclear program and Iraq. Regarding the nuclear issue, Mu'allim questioned why the U.S. failed to challenge Israel's

refusal to sign the NPT and blocked Syrian diplomatic efforts to press for a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East. In his view the U.S. maintained a blatant double-standard on the issue. More broadly, Mu'allim said that Syria could help the U.S. in its relations with Iran, noting that it was not in the USG's interest to have political or economic confrontation with Iran.

¶15. (C) IRAQ: Regarding the issue of Iraq, Mu'allim insisted that Syria and Iran had emphasized publicly their support for the stability and unity of Iraq, and for the political process there. Responding to the Charge's point about the failure of Syrian actions to match up with this positive rhetoric, Mu'allim insisted that Syria had taken measures to enhance border security, action which he said had been acknowledged by the U.S. military in Iraq.

¶16. (C) SARG DESIRE TO ENGAGE WITH IRAQIS: Mu'allim also insisted that the U.S. did not really want to cooperate with Syria on Iraq issues, despite the fact that Syria is "a factor for stability in Iraq" and can provide a corrective to Iranian influence, especially because of its influence with various Sunni groups. Mu'allim subsequently returned to this issue, asking why the U.S. blocked attempts by Iraqi officials to engage with their Syrian counterparts. "Let the Iraqis move to engage with us. We are ready to move with them in all fields," said Mu'allim, pointing to SARG readiness to establish full diplomatic relations and work with the new Iraqi government, establish better joint border security cooperation, and enhance economic cooperation. "The end results will benefit the U.S.," said Mu'allim. This SARG readiness to deal with Iraq is not part of any proposed deal or quid pro quo with the U.S., but represents an area of common U.S.-Syrian interest. (Note: Mu'allim stated twice in this context that the SARG intended to cooperate with

UNIIIC and did not expect any concessions on this cooperation in exchange for engaging with the Iraqi government.)

¶17. (C) HAMAS'S VICTORY: Addressing the victory of Hamas in the Palestinian legislative elections, Mu'allim noted that "everyone was surprised, except us." In addition to representing a vote against PA corruption and other internal issues, the vote had to be seen as a Palestinian rejection of U.S. policies, said Mu'allim. He criticized the U.S. for pushing the Palestinians into extremism with its policies and stated that in his view the U.S. is wrong to put conditions on any aid to the Palestinians. The Charge noted the U.S. was by no means alone in insisting that Hamas recognize Israel's right to exist if it wanted the support of the international community.

¶18. (C) LEBANON; SHAWKAT DESIGNATION: On other issues, Mu'allim rejected the charge that Syria is interfering in the affairs of Lebanon, maintaining instead that it is the American Ambassador in Lebanon who is intervening in Lebanon's internal affairs. Mu'allim described the USG decision to designate SMI chief Asif Shawkat for sanctions as "another serious mistake." He described Shawkat as "a real partner" for the U.S. and disputed the Charge's contention that Shawkat was instrumental in the decision to break off security cooperation with the U.S.

¶19. (C) HARASSING CIVIL SOCIETY: Charge raised the issue of SARG harassment of Syrian civil society, noting for example that on January 31 the security services had intervened to prevent Riad Seif and other recently released Damascus Spring detainees from holding a press conference. Charge asked when the SARG would stop blaming its failure to implement any serious political or economic reforms on foreign pressure. "When the pressure stops," said Mu'allim, noting that it would take time for the SARG to make serious progress even after the pressure eased.

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